DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 472 CE 073 129

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TITLE	Adult Education: Social Change or Status Quo? ERIC Digest No. 176.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CE-96-176
PUB DATE	96
CONTRACT	RR93002001
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Education; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Philosophy; *Educational Trends; *Empowerment; Social Action; *Social Change; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *Status Quo

ABSTRACT

Since the 1920s, the focus of adult education has shifted from social change to professionalization to an emphasis on literacy and lifelong learning in a changing workplace. The adult education literature reflects ongoing debate over whether adult education should focus primarily on individuals or society and whether it should serve as a means of empowerment in a democratic society or an instrument for maintaining the status quo. Those who claim that adult education's mission is to support the status quo emphasize that adult education in North America serves primarily to socialize adults into changing circumstances in a basically stable (democratic-capitalist) society. Professionalization of adult educators also extends and upholds the existing system. On the other side of the debate are those who assert that, because of its emphasis on collaborative learning, knowledge production, power, and praxis (the interrelationship of reflection and action and theory and practice), adult education is a means of empowering people and thereby working for social change. It has been suggested that enlarging the boundaries of the profession of adult education to include those engaged in social action and change could build a bridge between academics and front-line activists. (Contains 17 references.) (MN)

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by Sandra Kerka

1996

EDO-CE-96-176

Adult Education: Social Change or Status Quo?

Some believe that adult education was focused on a mission of social change in its formative years as a field in the 1920s. As it evolved and became institutionalized, the field became preoccupied with professionalization. More recently, emphasis on literacy and lifelong learning in a changing workplace has allied it with the agenda of economic competitiveness. This Digest examines the debate over the mission of adult education: is it to transform individuals or society? It looks at whether adult education functions as a means of empowerment in a democratic society or as an instrument for maintaining the status quo.

Individual or Society?

One of the core tensions of adult education (Merriam and Brockett 1997) is whether the primary focus of the field should be on individuals or society. Beatty (1992) is unequivocal in her stance: "The individual and change within the individual are not only the necessary and sufficient beginning and ending points for all adult education but also the focal point for the educational undertaking" (p. 17). She argues that the individual-society dichotomy is false: educated, empowered individuals create social change in ever-increasing spheres. Hass (1992) agrees that social change is brought about by the individuals affected. Mezirow's transformative theory suggests that individual perspective transformation must precede social transformation (Merriam and Brockett 1997).

In describing the ideas of Lindeman, Heaney (1996) and Wilson (1992) point out the complexity of the relationship between individuals and society. For Lindeman, individual growth and development take place within the social context, and changed individuals will have the collective effect of changing society. But Wilson states that it is unclear just how the social order is thereby changed. Others suggest that groups and communities, not individuals, create social change (Horton 1989), that personal autonomy can be achieved only through collective action (Welton 1993), and that the fully developed individual is the consummation of the fully developed society. Ilsley (1992) argues that, although equality in the United States has been defined in terms of individual opportunity, liberty and justice do not arise from individualism.

Embedded in this argument is another debate over whether adult education actually did set out with a social purpose that has been lost. A strong practice of adult education for social change is apparent in the work of Paulo Freire in Latin America and Myles Horton at the Highlander Folk School. Their influence continues, although "well on the margins of the adult education mainstream" (Heaney 1996, p. 37). On the other hand, Rockhill (cited in Welton 1994) claims adult education was never committed to social justice but to the legitimation of one form of knowledge. Ehrlich (1993) thinks that social change objectives "have not been converted to successful practice" (p. 67), and Heaney (1996) proposes that it was not a loss of concern but competing visions for change with enormous differences in what is meant by "social change."

Adult Education and the Status Quo

How does adult education support the status quo? "More often than not, adult education in North America serves to socialize adults into changing circumstances, allowing them to 'fit' into a changing but basically democratic-capitalist social structure" (Merriam and Brockett 1997, p. 92). Two of the three purposes of adult education practice in the United States identified by Heaney (1996) are allied with maintaining this social structure: (1) bringing learners into conformity with mainstream roles and expectations and (2) developing the best and brightest and validating the privileges of this educated elite.

Heaney (1993) traces a shift from adult education's role in building a new nation to homogenizing and socializing immigrants to supporting efficiency in business and industry. As the spirit of the nation shifts from the common good to a consumer orientation, education becomes a "learning market," supporting economic needs for skills, competence, and mobility (Edwards 1995). Hass (1992) urges educators to take advantage of this market: "We must treat adult education as a commodity that can be purchased. We should not be embarrassed to put a price on it. In today's society, value is usually measured by price. Adult education will become increasingly valuable" (p. 33). However, Edwards (1995) argues that the learning market proclaims free choice while reproducing the inequalities consumers bring to the marketplace.

Helping adults cope with a changing workplace has placed increasing emphasis on techniques, competencies, and skills. Wilson (1992) considers Knowles' approach to be rooted in technical methods and individual psychology. He finds that, although Knowles recognizes the forces of society affecting the individual (especially technological change), those forces are not critically examined.

Professionalization of adult educators also extends and upholds the existing system, and Zacharakis-Jutz (1988) points out an inherent contradiction in professionalization. Because adult educators are themselves beneficiaries of the educational meritocracy, they have a stake in maintaining the status quo, which could affect their approach and their responsibility to those outside the mainstream.

Adult Education and Social Change

Even if individual development was once a meaningful goal for adult education, the physical limits to growth and the fragmentation of contemporary society make an adult development approach counterproductive today, according to Finger (1995). He sees several factors underlying the need for a new collective orientation: (1) individual self-fulfillment may be an unreachable goal for most of the world's population; (2) self-directed learning and critical thinking may have initially been agents for social change, but their context has changed; and (3) empowerment,

a "liberating adult education practice" according to Freire and Horton, may have lost the political context that made it meaningful. Finger calls for collective, collaborative, and social learning as the basis for adult education.

In this new context, "the possession of knowledge has become increasingly significant for individuals and groups who wish to influence societal development" (Arvidson and Rubenson 1992, p. 198). Access to ideas and to knowledge production and processing are becoming decisive factors for social discrimination, according to Bogard (1992), who believes that it is not just access but interpretation that offers power. The new form of disadvantage is isolation from information networks and inability to decode cultural signs. Heaney (1993) agrees that "the most effective power is exercised by control of knowledge" (p. 16). However, the issue arises of whose knowledge is legitimate. Cunningham (1993) argues that a democratic adult education should facilitate the production of knowledge by the "have-nots" to counter the official knowledge of the "haves." New social movements such as feminism, peace, and environmentalism are attempting to create knowledge that challenges mainstream knowledge through grassroots political learning, critical discourse, and nontraditional techniques of research and problem solving. Welton (1993) urges adult educators to ally with them.

Merriam and Brockett (1997) summarize the characteristics of adult education for social change:

- *Collaborative learning*—locally initiated and locally controlled, "it regards individual learning as a byproduct of collaborative learning and not an end in itself" (p. 249)
- *Knowledge production*—"the starting point for social change is the notion that people can create knowledge that is more relevant, useful, and empowering than knowledge brought in by outsiders" (p. 252)
- *Power*—adult education can help people understand the networks of power relations and empower themselves to change them
- *Praxis*—the interrelationship of reflection and action, of theory and practice

Conclusion

Adult education at the end of this century is represented by both streams: market-driven, professionalized institutions that help individuals acquire the knowledge and skills needed to maintain the status quo, and those who envision a different order and consider the purpose of their educative work is to bring it about. Heaney (1996) concludes that professionalization can give adult educators a base from which to work for different social purposes. An enlargement of the boundaries of the profession to include those engaged in social action and change could build a bridge between academics and front-line activists. He suggests that "such a task inevitably requires rebuilding the foundations of and possibly renaming the field of practice and study" (p. 41). In working for social change, it will also be necessary to alter the status quo of the field of adult education itself.

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